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'Ulum al-Qur'an: (An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur'an)

Book Review
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Book Name: 'Ulum al-Qur'an – An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur'an
Author: Ahmad Von Denffer
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Introduction:

The Qur'an has been revealed for guidance for all times and situations to come. It contains the revelations of Allah, the Creator and the Sustainer of the Universe, to mankind and therefore it is of utmost importance to us. To properly grasp the message enshrined in the Qur'an, one must understand its contents properly; this requires deep and detailed study of the Qur'an. Some special knowledge of the circumstances that surround the message is also necessary for complete understanding of its meaning and implication.

Muslims from the very beginning have applied themselves not only to the message of Allah, but also to its setting and framework, and the preoccupation with these ultimately developed in to the "sciences" of Qur'an known as 'Ulum al-Qur'an. The proper approach towards understanding the Qur'an is three fold: to receive the message, to understand it and finally to apply it practically.

The branch of knowledge which we refer to as 'Ulum al-Qur'an is concerned with the Book of revelations on the last Prophet Muhammad (sws). It lays emphasis on the revelation, the collection, the order and arrangement, the written text, the information and occasions of revelation, Makkan and Madinan surahs, the abrogating and abrogated verses, the muhkam and mutashabih verses, also covering the explanation of verses and passages by the Prophet (sws) himself, his companions, their followers and later exegetes of the Qur'an.

The aim of this book is to assist in a better understanding of the Qur'anic message by providing information on its setting, framework and circumstances. Some branches of 'Ulum al-Qur'an have been discussed briefly such as the divisions of the text, style, literary form etc and other important aspects such as the seven ahraf have been dealt with in more detail.

This book is aimed at a special readership, the younger educated Muslims who have little or no access to the original sources on the subject. For increased understanding of this readership, Denffer has drawn special attention to a number of features like the Orientalists and the Qur'an, the translations of the Qur'an in different languages for better comprehension, the modern interpretation of the Qur'an along with the reading and recitation and language of the Holy Book. Examples have also been often quoted to illustrate various points. The over all aim of this book has been to provide a concise introduction for the young Muslim readership and to help them understand concepts in which they don't have the ability to access the original sources.

In short, Ahmad Von Denffer has made a successful attempt towards comprehending the message of the Qur'an fully, and his effort should be appreciated.

Here is a chapter-wise summary of the book.

Chapter One: The Qur'an and Revelation

In this chapter, Denffer discusses different prophets and the scriptures revealed to them. He then defines the Qur'an as the speech of Allah sent down on the last Prophet Muhammad (sws) through angel Gabriel in its precise and meaningful wording transmitted through tawatur both verbally and in writing. Denffer then goes on describing what Hadith is, explaining it in the light of its differences with the Qur'an. It is also explained how God had guided mankind through revelation. In the words of Suyuti, the Qur'an descended in two stages: from lawh-i al-mahfuz, and from the heavens to earth in stages starting from the laylah al-qadr of Ramadan. The chapter is concluded by mentioning the reasons as to why the Qur'an was sent down in stages and not in a single go.

Chapter Two: Transmission of the Qur'anic Revelation

The transmission of the Qur'an, orally and verbally, is the main issue discussed in this chapter. How the Prophet (sws) encouraged his companions to memorize the Qur'an, and how he memorized the Qur'an himself is referred to. It is certain according to Denffer that the Qur'an was memorized in the life time of the Holy Prophet (sws) by the Companions (rta). The Holy Prophet also sent teachers to communities in other places so that they may receive instruction in Islam and the Qur'an. The term jam' al-qur'an which refers to the bringing together of the Qur'an is explained, and according to Suyuti's Itqan, Denffer says that the Qur'an was written down entirely during the life time of Prophet (sws); however, it was not brought together in a single bound volume and was thus not arranged in any particular order. The Qur'an was dictated by the Prophet (sws) himself to the Companions (rta) as a revelation came but he did not leave behind these revelations in book form, though he did guide the Companions (rta) about the order and arrangement of the material. The author also introduces the concept of suhuf and mushaf and thereby briefly touches upon different masahif (pl. of mushaf) of the different companions like Ibn Mas'ud (rta), Ubayy Ibn Ka'b (rta), Ibn 'Abbas (rta) and other Companions (rta). The mushaf of Uthman (rta) is outlined and the chapter is concluded by mentioning the differences in the nature of the collections of Abu Bakr (rta) and Uthman (rta).

Chapter Three: The Qur'an in Manuscript and Print

The emphasis in this chapter is on the Qur'anic script. The script used in the seventeenth century is compared to the one we have today. The Vowel Marks (tashkil) and Diacritical Marks (i'jam) are explained. Early manuscripts are also discussed by Denffer and according to Suyuti, the well known copies of the Qur'an during the time of 'Uthman (rta) were only five. In the end, it is claimed that the copies of the Qur'an which were originally prepared during the time of 'Uthman (rta) would match any printed or hand written copy of the Qur'an from any place or period of time in text and arrangement, and they would be found identical.

Chapter Four: Form, Language and Style

In this chapter, the author discusses the divisions in the text of the Qur'an. The shortest division mentioned is that of ayah which separates a phrase or sentence; this is followed by surah division which can be referred to as a chapter. Other dividers such as juz' and ruku' are touched upon in a concise manner. The Qur'an has 114 surahs and all of them (except the 9th) begin with bismillah al-rahman al-rahim. All the surahs have names which serve as headings and distinguish them from each other. The order and arrangement of the Qur'an is also mentioned. In the author's opinion, it is of great importance to understand the message of the Qur'an and in order to do so, first the message of the Qur'an should be received correctly and completely and then it has to be "decoded" to grasp the meanings of the message received. It is also said that to understand the Qur'an, understanding its language is a prerequisite. The literary form and style of the Qur'an are then discussed.

Chapter Five: Makkan and Madinan Revelations

Denffer in this chapter talks about the growth and development of the Muslim ummah which was marked by two great phases: the Makkan phase and the Madinan phase. The Makkan phase lasted for about thirteen years and the topics discussed in the Makkan surahs include Allah and His Unity, the Day of Judgment and the righteous conduct for Muslims. The Madinan phase, on the other hand, lasted for about ten years and the primary topic discussed in the surahs of this phase is the formation of the ummah. It is important to know the origin of a surah according to the author as at times it is of extremely significant to know the chronology of the verses in order to understand the gradual development of Muslim practices, attitudes and laws. This knowledge of Makkan and Madinan revelations is one of the important branches of 'Ulum al-Qur'an. Another valuable concept introduced here is the asbab al-nazul which helps one understand the circumstances in which a particular revelation occurred. Denffer then brings to attention the al-nasikh wa al-mansukh which means abrogating and abrogated verses respectively. According to Shafi'i, only the Qur'an abrogates the Qur'an; the Qur'an does not abrogate the Sunnah nor does the Sunnah abrogate the Qur'an. The author also discusses the generally accepted view that there are seven modes of the Qur'an which are the distinct ways of reciting the Qur'an, reflecting the different usage at different times of revelation and also comprising differences in pronunciation and minor variations in wordings. Some evidence is also found that the Qur'an we have in front of us includes all seven modes. There are also said to be seven readings of the Qur'an which were at best transmitted through tawatur.

Chapter Six: Interpreting the Text

Interpreting the Qur'anic text in a proper manner is the main issue around which this chapter revolves. Tafsir of the Qur'an is the most important science for all Muslims and without it many Qur'anic passages would not be clear. Tafsir in the language of scholars means explanation or clarification. The best tafsir is the explanation of the Qur'an by the Qur'an and next comes the explanation of the Qur'an by Prophet Muhammad (sws). Denffer has then distinguished between different kinds of tafsir along with their explanations. Also some light is shed on the tafsir literature. After this, the science of translation is discussed. Since one can best understand the text of Qur'an in its own language, a translation only adds to the number of people who are able to understand and get familiarized with the teachings of the Holy Book. With this, Denffer discusses the limitations of a translation and also outlines which translation is more reliable and authentic.

Chapter Seven: Some Related Issues

The author starts concluding the book in this chapter. The focus is on the Qur'an as a miracle as there are certain features of the Qur'an that make it inimitable. This characteristic of Qur'an is referred to as I'jaz al-Qur'an. Denffer takes the reader forward to the tahaddi which is the challenge to others to imitate the Qur'an. Here various aspects of i'jaz are also described. Further ahead in the chapter, Denffer discussed the Orientalists and their points of view. Orientalists have seriously studied Islam, and have been trying to conceive the original order of the Qur'anic text since to them the chronological arrangement is of fundamental importance for understanding the text. Different orientalists like Jeffery, Noldeke, and Pretzel are discussed along with their points of view. In the opinion of the author himself however the isnad needs to be scrutinized carefully in each case to see which report on the variant readings is authentic. Further towards the end of the chapter Denffer talks about the orientalist point of view on the collection of the Holy Qur'an.

Chapter Eight: Reading and Studying the Qur'an

The concluding chapter is kept relatively very simple. Instructions are passed by the author as to how the Qur'an should be implemented in our daily life. Methods for the recitation of the Qur'an are explained. Stress is laid upon the memorization of the Qur'an and how the Qur'an should be a part of everyday life. The approach to be taken while studying the Qur'an is first reading and understanding the concepts introduced and then adopting them in every day life. The book thus ends on Denffer's

personal suggestions as to how the Qur'an should be a part of our daily life and routine and how it can be read and understood in the most effective way.



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